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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000108

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO/PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MCA](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFENSE MINISTER MURR SAYS MARCH 14  
"STILL NEEDS PLAN"

REF: A. 09 BEIRUT 00053

[1](#)B. 08 BEIRUT 01677

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) In a January 26 meeting with the Ambassador, Defense Minister Elias Murr stressed his "purely UNSCR 1701" agenda for his planned January 28 visit to Damascus. He again expressed concern about the lack of March 14 organization for the upcoming parliamentary elections and said he continues to push March 14 leader Saad Hariri to play a more visible role. Murr was particularly concerned because he understood that Hariri has failed to pay his Future Party staff since November. Murr argued the best way to counter Syria, Iran, and Hizballah was to provide strong security on election day; he plans to deploy the LAF to vulnerable areas next week. According to Murr, President Sleiman is enthusiastic about an independent electoral list, while Christian opposition MP Michel Aoun is slightly nervous about some independent candidates, including Neemat Frem. Murr said he would raise the issue of GOL funding for the remaining M60 tanks in the January 27 Cabinet session. He will also accompany Sleiman to the UAE where he will pursue the purchase of Hawker Hunter aircraft. End summary.

PREPARED FOR ALL  
"SURPRISES" IN DAMASCUS  
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[1](#)2. (C) Discussing his scheduled trip to Damascus January 28 to meet the Syrian Defense Minister and Chief of Staff, Defense Minister Elias Murr reiterated to the Ambassador, accompanied by PolEconoff, that no meeting with President Bashar Asad had been scheduled for him. Acknowledging, however, that "anything can happen" with the Syrians, Murr said he was fully prepared for any unplanned encounter. President Sleiman and Murr's father and Metn political heavyweight Elias Murr -- both of whom Murr had met the day before -- strongly cautioned the Minister to steer away from political discussions while in Syria. They expressed concern that Asad would try to pressure Minister Murr in order to sway his father to a more pro-Syrian position in 2009 parliamentary elections. Sleiman counseled Murr to be firm in his representation of the Ministry of Defense only, said

the Defense Minister.

13. (C) Murr said the focus of his visit would remain on UNSCR 1701 and border security. After the visit, Murr said he would meet with UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams -- who will issue a report on UNSCR 1701 in March -- to provide an update to Syrian and Lebanese efforts to secure their border. Murr will travel with LAF Chief of Staff General Shawk el Masri, member of the Military Council General George Hashem, and General Hajjar.

14. (C) Regarding potential implications for Lebanon Syrian-Saudi Arabian reconciliation, Murr was skeptical. Murr assessed that Saudi King Abdullah "wanted a picture" of reconciliation and unity during the Arab economic summit in Kuwait. According to Minister Murr, his father has information from Saudi Ambassador in Lebanon Khoja that the Saudis are fully engaged against Syria and Iran in the 2009 Lebanese parliamentary elections. According to Murr, Khoja told Neemat Frem -- who had been waffling about running as an independent in 2009 elections -- to seek Maronite Patriarch Sfeir's blessing for participation in 2009 elections, and to run, or Frem's extensive business links in Saudi Arabia would be at risk.

MARCH 14 STILL A WORK IN PROGRESS  
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15. (C) According to Murr, President Sleiman is "excited" about the potential of a bloc independent deputies. Murr assessed about ten deputies (of the 128 total) would

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participate in the independent grouping. Murr told the Ambassador that opposition FPM leader Michel Aoun was "a little concerned" about the possible candidacies of independent Christians Neemat Frem and Mansour Ilbon.

16. (C) Murr expressed concern regarding March 14 preparedness for elections, and said he had relayed the same concerns to Future Movement leader Saad Hariri the previous day. Murr noted that with only two months until the deadline for announcing candidates, March 14 electioneers were absent from the key swing districts of Baabda, Kserwan, Jbeil, Batroun, and Koura. By contrast, Murr said he and his father had been working in the Metn district for seven months to solidify support. Murr told the Ambassador that Hariri has failed to pay his Future Party staff since November. He assessed that Saudi Arabia had clamped down on funding to pressure Hariri to formalize his electoral campaign structure. (Note: With "Arabian Business" magazine naming Saad and his brothers Bahaa and Ayman as three of the Arab world's 50 wealthiest individuals with holdings of 2.6 billion, 2.3 billion, and 2.1 billion dollars respectively, we believe Saad could meet this payroll without Saudi help. End note.)

17. (C) However, Murr -- citing information from MP and Jumblatt advisor Marwan Hamadeh and others -- said Hariri thus far had failed to start work on the ground. Noting Hariri's daily four-hour lunches and dinners, Murr expressed concern about progress, or lack thereof, in election preparation. Murr told the Ambassador he was pushing Hariri to increase his and his political machine's presence on the ground and also recommended Hariri stay in the country until elections. Murr confirmed rumors of the reemergence of MTV but explained that the organization still needs restructuring -- to rid itself of the previous pro-Lebanese Forces image -- and about USD 20 million in financing.

18. (C) On March 14 negotiations on candidates, Murr said Christian Kataeb Party head Amine Gemayel and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea were "part of the solution," not the problem. Murr, however, was concerned about relations between Gemayel and Minister of State Nassib Lahoud, who "hate each other under the table." Gemayel is pushing Hariri, according to Murr, to drop Lahoud from the March 14

list in the Metn. Murr assessed that, although Lahoud probably did not have many votes, he "has the image," and should stay on the ballot. Murr also assessed Sleiman supported Nassib Lahoud. However, if Sami Gemayel, 28-year old son and political heir of Amine, urged his supporters to boycott Lahoud, the March 14 vote would split and Aoun would gain two or three Christian seats in the Metn. In general, however, Murr assessed Aoun currently had only twenty-six percent of Christian support in the Metn district.

#### OPPOSITION UP AND RUNNING

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¶9. (C) Murr reported that, on the opposite side, Hizballah has structured a political machine for its Christian ally Michel Aoun. The opposition has the financing, structure, and professionalism required to win 2009 elections, Murr said; March 14, on the other hand, is lacking in all these areas. Despite this, Murr expected close results from the 2009 parliamentary elections and the formation of a national unity government. Additionally, President Sleiman would fight to keep the Defense Ministry, and probably the Interior Ministry, under his control. Although Sleiman previously had raised the possibility with Murr that he would assume responsibility of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ref A), Sleiman, according to Murr, now hopes to keep Murr as Minister of Defense for Sleiman's full six years in office. Murr had told the Ambassador Sleiman had hoped Murr could lead Lebanon in any indirect talks with Israel. As Minister of Defense, Murr assessed he still could play that role, as he would be the senior Cabinet Minister, and most of Lebanon's outstanding issues with Israel fell within the military portfolio. Murr had no new news on the ongoing LAF-UNIFIL investigations into the January 8 and 14 rocket attacks launched from south Lebanon into Israel.

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#### SECURITY BEST COUNTER TO SYRIA, IRAN

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¶10. (C) On election security, Murr said that as of next week the LAF will behave "as though the elections were tomorrow." He argued that good security on the ground was the best way to counter Hizballah, Syria, and Iran. Starting next week, soldiers will deploy to villages deemed vulnerable to violence because of Sunni-Shia tensions, Murr said, and would carry out "simulations" of election security. Murr told the Ambassador he had a five-hour meeting scheduled with LAF Commander General Jean Kahwaji later in the day.

#### RAISING M60 FUNDING IN CABINET, UAE HAWKS

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¶11. (C) Regarding payment for the remaining M60 tanks as part of the 2009 budget, Murr said he would meet with Siniora tomorrow before the Cabinet session to discuss how to propose the issue to ministers. Murr said he, on behalf of the LAF, will ask the Cabinet to approve GOL funding for the tanks. He feared March 8 ministers would react negatively if Siniora raised the request. Murr said he preferred to pay the USD 100 million for the remaining M60's from the Lebanese budget and possibly accept UAE's offer of funding at a later date.

¶12. (C) Murr told the Ambassador he will accompany President Sleiman on the President's upcoming trip to the UAE. During the visit, the UAE would announce its offer to Lebanon of ten "practically new" PUMA transport helicopters. Murr also intended to explore the possibility of purchasing ten Hawk aircraft from the UAE. According to Murr, the subsonic aircraft, fitted with air-to-ground rockets, are perfectly suited to securing Lebanon's Palestinian camps and fighting terrorism, and are also affordable to maintain. They are about 25 years old, he estimated. Murr said six pilots have

already attended training on the Hawker Hunter in the UAE. Additionally, the UAE will announce its plan to weaponize Lebanon's Gazelle helicopters during the February 22-26 International Defense Exhibition and Conference in Abu Dhabi.

#### DOUBTS ABOUT MIG-29S FROM RUSSIA

¶13. (C) Murr said he had closed the file on Russia's offer of MiG-29 planes to Lebanon. The Russian Ambassador to Lebanon told Murr that President Putin was upset by Lebanon's handling of the deal, but Murr said the issue was "sleeping" for now. Murr said he would send someone to Moscow later to see the planes but would refuse the MiGs as Lebanon's air force does not have the budget for training or maintenance.

#### COMMENT

¶14. (C) As always with Elias Murr, some of his comments are self-serving. He does have a good relationship with Hariri, however, and we hope his influence can persuade Hariri to focus on election preparations. Murr's trip to the UAE and his pursuit of Hawker Hunter aircraft is also a positive development. The aircraft seem to be well-suited for the LAF's needs; Beirut DATT and ODC suggest that some parts from Lebanon's existing Hawker Hunter aircraft could be used in the newer model from the UAE. End comment.

SISON